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LOOKING AHEAD:

Pickett's progress in key role a highlight of 2022

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Labriola on putting ’22 in perspective

It was July 26, 2022, and the Steelers were in a place that managed to be both completely familiar and totally unfamiliar at the same time. They were back at Saint Vincent College for the opening day of training camp for the 54th summer after being away for the previous two because of Covid-19, but for the first time of the Mike Tomlin era the top line on their quarterback depth chart was going to contain a name other than “Ben Roethlisberger.”

After four perfunctory housekeeping questions on that July afternoon, the media got right to it at Tomlin’s introductory news conference. “I understand that’s the elephant in the room. We’re not going to micromanage or overmanage this quarterback competition,” said Tomlin. “The depth chart will not rest on every throw. I know you guys will want to ask me every day and about every throw, but we’re going to be a little bit more steady than that. I think it’s important from a leadership perspective to not overmanage it, to not be too impulsive, so that’s what I’ve relayed to those guys, and our actions will continue to display that mindset.”

The very next question stayed on topic but lasered in on first-round draft pick Kenny Pickett’s readiness for what awaited him. “I’m not overly concerned about that narrative,” said Tomlin. When you’re 22, 23, 24 years old and you’ve been playing quarterback your whole life, you understand those informal responsibilities that come with the position. I’m more concerned about tangible things, accuracy, taking care of the ball and things of that nature. I don’t have any level of concern about those things being in his wheelhouse. I watched him do it next door (at Pitt) in terms of leading his guys and being what we need quarterbacks to be. I don’t think that’s going to be a significant discussion.”

It’s six-and-a-half months later, and Pickett had done enough and shown enough in both the tangible and intangible categories to have convinced the Steelers they got the guy to follow Ben Roethlisberger. And they accomplished it in their first attempt.

* * *

The 2022 offseason began with the Steelers uncharacteristically active in the initial phase of free agency, and their first signing was young veteran quarterback Mitch Trubisky. With an NFL resume that contained a 29-21 regular season record as a starter, two starts in the playoffs, and one Pro Bowl nod, Trubisky began with the first-team offense as soon as on-field drills began with OTAs during the offseason program.

During the rest of a process that included training camp and three preseason games, Trubisky never did anything to lose his spot atop the depth chart and was the starter in the regular season opener on Sept. 11 in Cincinnati vs. the defensive conference champion Bengals.

“There’s no easy answer in terms of what’s the best way to break in a rookie quarterback. Normally you don’t go into the season saying, ‘OK, we’re

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ON THE COVER

Once Coach Mike Tomlin decided on rookie QB Kenny Pickett as the starter, and Pickett grew into the job, the Steelers had a succession plan for Ben Roethlisberger.

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FROM PAGE 3

Digest Photo/JARED WICKERHAM

going to start the rookie,'" said Steelers President Art Rooney II on Jan. 26 "I mean, that's not what I had in mind, and I don't think it's what Mike expected. So, the way it turned out turned out pretty good, given the fact that we probably didn't expect to have Kenny as our starter Week 1."

Pickett relieved Trubisky at halftime of the Oct. 2 game vs. the New York Jets, and proceeded to throw three interceptions on 13 attempts, which turned a 10-6 halftime deficit into a 24-20 loss that dropped the Steelers to 1-3. Things would get worse for the rookie quarterback and the Steelers before they got better, but Tomlin liked enough of what he was seeing on a day-to-day basis – the work ethic, the approach to analyzing his past performance and then switching quickly to the preparation for the upcoming performance, the way he saw Pickett "in terms of leading his guys and being what we need quarterbacks to be."

"I think (Pickett's) development is a process, and we've said throughout that I thought his development took off once he started getting into stadiums in the preseason, so there was a process there," said Tomlin on Jan. 9, the day after the regular season finale. "He was playing in the third groups. He was playing in the second groups. We gave him some first-group exposure. Preseason football is different than regular season football, let's be honest. So, he bided his time and worked in a regular season football environment, and when he had an opportunity, when it presented itself, he showed that he belonged, and he continued to get better in that space."

The on-field improvement included a significant reduction in turnovers, because as Chuck Noll preached, "Before you can win a game, you have to not lose it." The interceptions dropped from 7 in his first 12 quarters to 1 over his final 224 attempts during a streak when the Steelers won 7 of their final 8 games. And as a little cherry on top of the sundae, in quarterbacking the Steelers to a 13-10 victory over the Raiders followed by a 16-13 win in Baltimore, Pickett became the first rookie in NFL history to have a game-winning touchdown pass in the final minute of the fourth quarter in back-to-back games.

Pickett's final statistics placed him 32nd of the 33 quarterbacks who qualified to be ranked in the final NFL statistics, but where he already was performing as a seasoned pro was in doing the things his team needed when the game was on the line. The Steelers can work with the latter while Pickett works to improve on the former.

"I think it's reasonable to expect a sharp, hardworking, talented guy to get better with each exposure and particularly to do so rapidly at the initial stages of gaining experience," said Tomlin about Pickett's statistical improvement down the stretch of the season. Later, Tomlin would add: "I can't say enough about our young quarterback. He smiled in the face of it. He's always ready to be that guy in the moments that we need him. And it's just good to see that. We marched forward."

Moving forward also describes the ultimate decision about offensive coordinator Matt Canada. In Rooney's mind, Pickett's individual improvement, plus in some facets of the offense in general over the final couple of months of the season tipped the scales in favor of keeping Canada.

But that shouldn't be mistaken for a lifetime mandate, because when Rooney was asked what he wanted to see from his team in 2023, he was direct.

"Score more points," said Rooney. "We talked about the areas of improvement, and I think there are some good ones, but we didn't score enough points is the bottom line. In particular, not great red zone efficiency. So, those are a couple things I would identify that we clearly have to get better at."

Moving forward, that work will happen with Pickett at quarterback, and the playmaking flashed on those final-possession touchdown drives has the Steelers feeling good about his potential contribution to the improvement Rooney wants. In particular the decisive 10-yard touchdown pass to Najee Harris in the final minute of the win in Baltimore was reminiscent of the quarterback Pickett was brought aboard to follow. Just listen to Tomlin describe what happened, and then picture a Steelers quarterback wearing No. 7 doing the same thing to the same team at the same venue. Because that happened.

"The play got extended. He moved to his left. Najee kept his eyes on him. Just two highly competitive guys finishing and making a play," said Tomlin. "Much like last week (against the Raiders), I just like the overall demeanor of the collective in those moments when it's thick. Nobody is acting funny. You can drill it, but it's just that it's a drill. The reality of it is always a little bit different than the drill work."

Added Rooney, "I think that means a lot. Being able to function like that in pressure situations, when the game's on the line, the season's on the line ... in those situations for us in those games, that's good to see."

* * *

The 2022 season is history, and the Steelers not making the playoffs represents a failure. But within that failure maybe lies a more significant success, because back in July there was only uncertainty about the franchise's quarterback position and its immediate future, but today there is a plan. And that plan has a name.

"Obviously, a key factor in the season was having a rookie starting quarterback who stepped in about a quarter of the way through the season," said Rooney. "The progression of Kenny I think was obvious, and good to see, and hopefully something that we'll continue to build on next year." ✦

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Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Pickett already back to work to build upon rookie season

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

It was just a little over a week after the season ended when quarterback Kenny Pickett walked into the UPMC Rooney Sports Complex and headed back to the locker room.

While many of his teammates were nowhere to be found, Pickett was coming into the building to get a workout in, a workout he thought was going to wait for a month or so, but he was already getting antsy from inactivity.

"I was planning on taking a lot more time off, but I've never taken a lot of time off," said Pickett. "I took a couple of days off, and I wasn't acting myself, and my fiancée, Amy, said, 'You got to get back to training.' I'm just happy doing this. I genuinely like doing it. I genuinely like being here.

"I think in order to be great you have to have a love for the game. I want to be one of the best. I know what I have to do and there's a lot of things that we need to do as a team to get us to our goals. I feel like it all starts with me and my play. I've got to be the guy who takes us there. So, I'm ready to take it on."

No rookie played a more significant role for the Steelers in 2022 than Pickett, the team's No. 1 draft pick. Pickett stepped in as the team's quarterback at halftime of the Week 4 game against the New York Jets, unexpectedly learning the news in the locker room during the halftime break.

"You don't have time to think when that happens," said Pickett. "It's like, 'hey, you're up.'"

Pickett held onto the starting role for the remainder of the season, finishing out by winning Joe Greene Great Performance Award, presented to the team's rookie of the year.

He completed 245 of 389 pass attempts for 2,404 yards and seven touchdowns in 13 games, starting 12 of them. He has also carried the ball 55 times for 237 yards and three touchdowns, including mastering the quarterback sneak.

The other thing he mastered is fourth quarter game-winning drives, coming through with back-to-back efforts in Week 16 and Week 17. In doing so, Pickett became the first rookie in NFL history to have a game-winning touchdown pass in the final minute in back-to-back games.

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"I think there's an art to the two-minute drive," said Pickett. "I watched a lot of tape, studied. Every week I was the guy who did the two-minute breakdown of the opposing team for the quarterback room. I've watched a lot of two-minute drills. As I was watching them, I was talking to a lot of coaches around here, including Coach (Brian) Flores who helped me out a lot with the two-minute.

"There's an art to it and there's a feel for it. It just comes with repetition. I had a lot of reps with it and success at the college level. I just needed that time to get some reps at the pro level and Coach (Mike) Tomlin gave me that opportunity in practice."

In Week 16, Pickett led the Steelers to a 13-10 win over the Raiders on a fourth quarter drive that ended with a 14-yard touchdown pass to George Pickens. The Steelers got the ball back with 2:55 on the clock and down 10-6, when Pickett engineered a 10-play, 76-yard drive, completing seven passes for 75 yards and on fourth-and-one getting the yard himself on a quarterback sneak to set up the touchdown.

And he did it with confidence.

"I imagine he was born with it," said Tomlin. "I know that it's not the first time I've seen it. I know it's not the first time that people from Western Pa. have seen it. We've seen him do it next door (at the University of Pittsburgh). I think that's why we have such a great deal of comfort in his intangible quality and from a draft-evaluation perspective. We were in close proximity to it. And when you're in close proximity to it, it becomes less intangible. You can almost feel it. It is real. I don't think any of us are surprised by it."

Against the Ravens in Week 17, Pickett took the Steelers on an 11-play, 80-yard drive, in 3:20 that culminated in a 10-yard touchdown pass to Najee Harris. He showed veteran poise, with no panic at all, completing a 20-yard pass to tight end Pat Freiermuth and a 28-yard strike to Steven Sims on the drive.

"Can't say enough about our young QB," said Tomlin. "He smiles in the face of it. He's always ready to be that guy in the moments that we need him to be that guy. And it's just good to see the young guy."

Pickett, though, deflects the praise elsewhere.

"It's the same every time," said Pickett. "It's just that everyone has to do their job. I've got to find a way to get the guys the ball and get in the end zone. So, it's a team effort, a group effort."

> "I think in order to be great you have to have a love for the game.
>
> - Kenny Pickett

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Pickett made his first NFL start against the Buffalo Bills in Week 5 and set team records for most pass attempts (34), completions (52) and passing yards (327) by a quarterback in their Steelers starting debut. He became only the fourth rookie quarterback to pick up a win in his first home start, Week 6 vs. Tampa Bay, since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger.

He also become the first rookie quarterback since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger to win four plus games and throw fewer than two interceptions over the course of November and December.

And it's just the beginning.

"Here in Pittsburgh, we value the growth that has the potential to happen between Year 1 and Year 2," said Tomlin. "It's natural. They're no longer speculating about what this is. They've had a lap around the track. They've been in some hot situations. They've had some positive results. They've had some negative results. They understand the totality of this in terms of the toll that it takes on them, mentally, physically, emotionally.

"I think all of those things that encompass the experience that is a rookie season is a good springboard to get better and to obviously do it with a quarterback, I'm really excited about that."

Tomlin isn't the only one excited about Pickett's future. His teammates feel the same way.

"I loved seeing how Kenny and the offense started to gel towards the end of the year," said linebacker Alex Highsmith. "Just seeing his growth and what type of leader he is, I'm excited for him to be our quarterback going into the future. He's such a competitor. I could tell that from training camp what type of competitor he was, and just week by week he kept going and getting better." ✦

JONATHAN SCOTT

Former Pittsburgh Steeler

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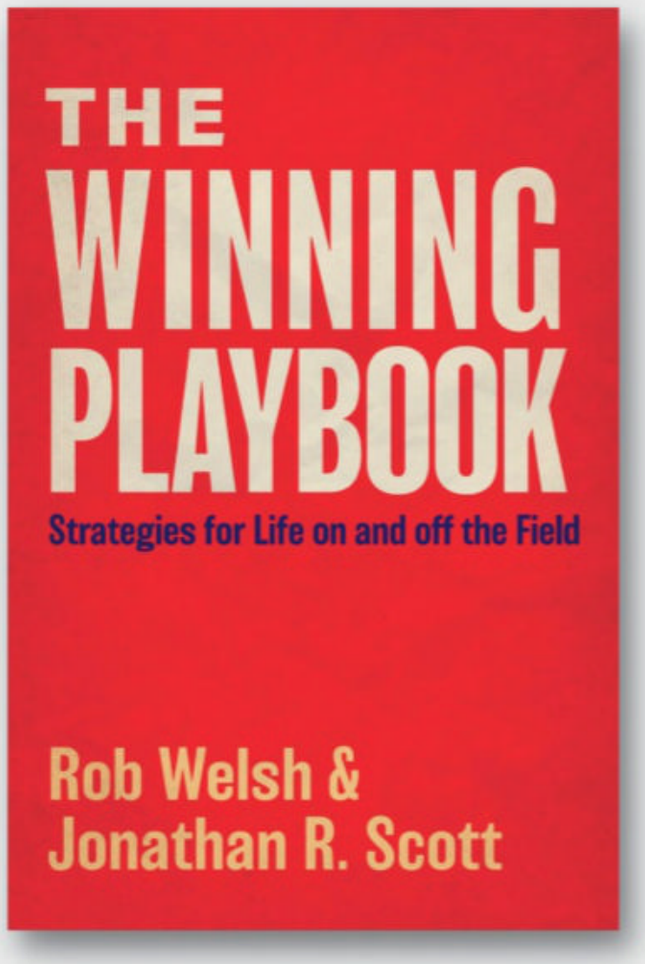
— Former NFL Lineman, Jonathan Scott



Jonathan Ray Scott is from Dallas, Texas. A former Pittsburgh Steelers lineman, a ten-year veteran of the National Football League as an offensive tackle, Jonathan was also a member of the 2005 National Champion Texas Longhorns football team. Jonathan’s life off the field has been as successful as his time on the field with experience in real estate, finance, education, coaching, executive leadership, and the music industry.

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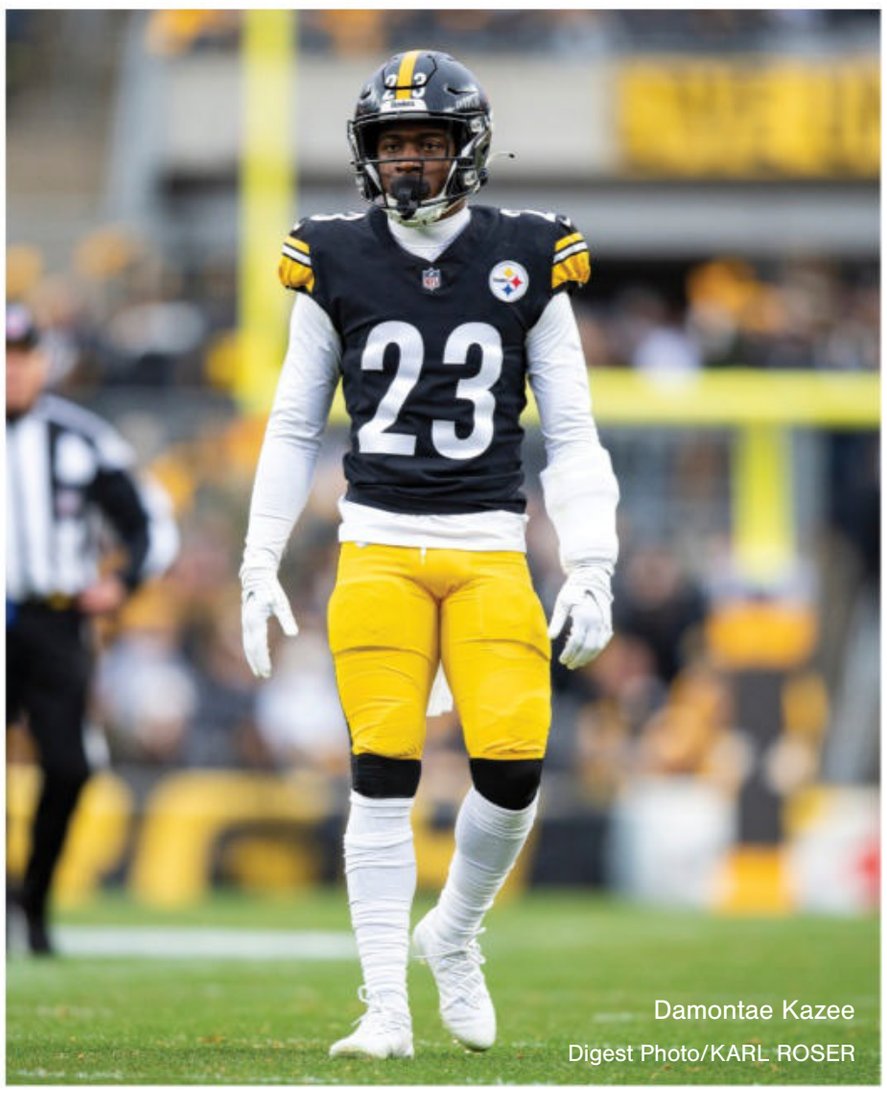
Larry Ogunjobi
Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

One man's rankings of the 19 UFAs team should re-sign



Damontae Kazee
Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

BY **JIM WEXELL**
Digest Correspondent

It's a massive class of 19 Steelers whose contracts have expired and who face the prospect of free agency when the period officially begins on March 15 at 4 p.m.

By the same token, there really aren't a lot of "must (re-)signs" for the Steelers.

Of course, there are some. Here's my top 10:

1. CAM SUTTON, CB: The starting right cornerback was third on the defense with 931 snaps and, appropriately, third on the team in interceptions with three. The Steelers finished tied for the NFL lead with 20 interceptions and would've won that title outright – and perhaps even made the playoffs – had Sutton held onto at least one of those he dropped. Normally sure-handed, Sutton is a team leader who just turned 28. He's in his prime and should be treated similarly to the way Deshea Townsend was treated. The former and current right cornerbacks are similar in size, draft position, and after six years with the team both had eight interceptions. And no one would be surprised if Sutton went into coaching after his playing career, as Townsend has. Someone better with mathematics can extrapolate what Sutton should make in his next contract compared to what Townsend made at the same point, but the bigger thrust of the matter is that the Steelers find a way to keep Sutton.

2. TERRELL EDMUNDS, SS: Let's begin with the numbers Edmunds will most certainly hear from the other side of the negotiating table: He was

Terrell Edmunds
Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Cameron Sutton
Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

fourth on the team with 886 defensive snaps but produced zero takeaways. And here are the career numbers: In 4,897 snaps, he has five interceptions, five sacks and one fumble recovery. Those are scant playmaking numbers. But for the Edmunds negotiating team, he WAS fourth in defensive snaps because his availability is his strength. He's only 26 and is strong, tough, fast, brings great energy, and is well-liked in the locker room. That adds up to a keeper – if the price is right.

3. DAMONTAE KAZEE, S: A better playmaker than Edmunds, Kazee isn't as durable and turns 30 in June. However, he's an excellent open-field tackler and, with two interceptions in his nine games, a true ballhawk. Those are the reasons a 30-year-old ranks so high on this list, along with the three-safety look that excites the coaching staff with its potential against 12 personnel (two tight ends) across the line of scrimmage.

4. ROBERT SPILLANE, ILB: It was outright confounding to fans and media that an inside linebacker who's so much better at defending the run than the pass was the team's lone linebacker in the dime defense on passing downs. But forget about that, because Spillane became the defensive signal caller – after Myles Jack got hurt and Devin Bush proved ineffective – and began playing all downs. He's only 27 years old and seems to still be a player on the rise.

5. LARRY OGUNJOBI, DT: I'll beg off slightly here since I don't know Ogunjobi's medical history. He played in 636 snaps (second among defensive linemen) but missed seemingly every practice, or at least enough to question whether he's healthy enough for a contract that Cam Heyward believes is an absolute must for the team. Ogunjobi was that good when he played. His pass rush slipped to 1.5 sacks, his lowest output since his 2017 rookie season, but he missed only one game – the 38-3 loss at Buffalo where the Bills rushed for 120 yards on only 18 carries. In other words, the Steelers got shredded without Ogunjobi, who, like his competitor for this contract, Chris Wormley, will be 29 years old at the start of the season.

6. ZACH GENTRY, TE: A positive and energetic force in the locker room, the 6-foot-8 "blocking" tight end didn't exactly block all that well, at least according to Pro Football Focus. Say what you want about PFF – and I've disagreed with their scouts several times – but they put eyes on every play (far more often than most of us in the media) and Gentry's run-blocking grade of 47.5 trailed Pat Freiermuth (59.6) and was ahead of only WR George Pickens and RB Najee Harris on the team. Gentry caught 19 passes for an average of 6.9 yards per catch.

7. DEREK WATT, FB: He would have to take a pay cut to remain, but only because he was signed to such high numbers and used so little – relatively speaking – since joining the team. A talented fullback who can run, catch and block, Watt played only 77 offensive snaps, and while he played 290 snaps on special teams, his 4 special teams tackles was well below the team-leading 12 by Marcus Allen and Arthur Maulet.

8. BENNY SNELL, RB: The third running back proved his worth when called upon by rushing for 62 yards on 12 carries against the Colts. Also a quality special-teamer with 8 tackles and a player who has matured greatly since entering the league.

9. MILES BOYKIN, WR: Speaking of special teams, Boykin made 10 tackles and was an exceptional gunner for a punt-coverage unit that finished third in the league. But he made only two catches because 102 of his 132 offensive snaps were on running plays.

10. TRENT SCOTT, OT: Just beats out Allen and Malik Reed (fifth in pass-rush snaps but only 1 sack) for the final spot on this list due to his performance in the season finale and the lack of depth on the offensive line. Scott helped the Steelers to 23 rushing yards in four plays of the first series against the Browns by playing the third tackle spot. ✦

(Jim Wexell, the author of "Polamalu: The Inspirational Story of Pittsburgh Steelers Strong Safety Troy Polamalu" has been contributing to Steelers Digest as a reporter and columnist for decades.)

STEELERS UNRESTRICTED FREE AGENTS

(Listed alphabetically)

Player	Position	Snaps played
Marcus Allen	ILB	230 special teams
Tyson Alualu	NT	291 defense
Miles Boykin	WR	132 off; 207 st
Devin Bush	ILB	659 defense
Jesse Davis	OT	58 offense
Terrell Edmunds	SS	886 def; 107 st
Zach Gentry	TE	577 off; 72 st
Karl Joseph	SS	Injured reserve
Damontae Kazee	S	273 def; 58 st
Anthony Miller	WR	Injured reserve
Larry Ogunjobi	DL	636 def; 55 st
Malik Reed	OLB	396 def; 58 st
Mason Rudolph	QB	None
Trent Scott	OT	31 offense
Benny Snell Jr.	RB	42 off; 284 st
Robert Spillane	ILB	588 off; 134 st
Cam Sutton	CB	931 def; 61 st
Derek Watt	FB	77 off; 290 st
Chris Wormley	DL	338 def; 78 st

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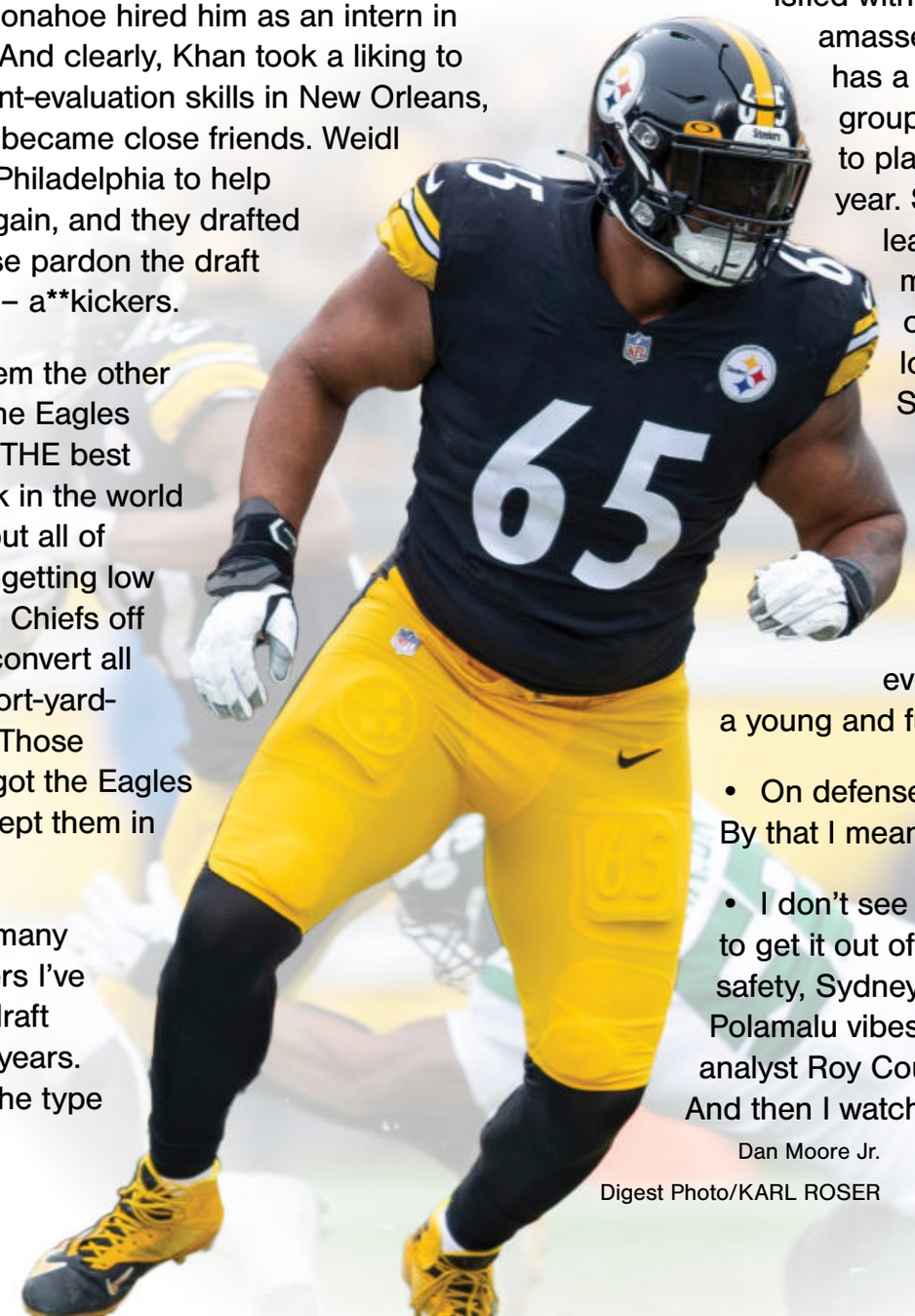
Just My Opinion By Jim Wexell

From the notebook of a sportswriter who – in spite of the loss by the Eagles in the Super Bowl – is excited to see if the Steelers can draft like them for a spell:

- For a spell? Is this the 1950s? Sorry, but I get freaked out trying to discern between "a while" and "awhile."
- So, I went with "for a spell."
- It was a spell of time during which Andy Weidl helped build the Eagles. But for the past year he's been the Steelers' assistant to the general manager.
- Wait. That's assistant general manager.
- Sorry to those who don't watch "The Office" and get my regional manager jokes.
- Anyway, Art Rooney II mentioned Weidl while answering a question about how first-year general manager Omar Khan might do things differently. "We're seeing changes already in the way Omar and Andy are preparing for the draft," said Rooney.
- Omar and Andy. They became something of a team in New Orleans. That's where Weidl went after Tom Donahoe hired him as an intern in Pittsburgh. And clearly, Khan took a liking to Weidl's talent-evaluation skills in New Orleans, where they became close friends. Weidl went off to Philadelphia to help Donahoe again, and they drafted – and please pardon the draft expression – a**kickers.
- You saw them the other night. No, the Eagles didn't have THE best quarterback in the world right now, but all of those guys getting low and moving Chiefs off the ball to convert all of those short-yardage plays? Those a**kickers got the Eagles there and kept them in that game.
- They were many of the players I've wanted to draft the last six years. Those are the type of players I want to see come here and am hoping Weidl can help.
- It's the Omar and Andy Show, and it's obvious the very top of the organization sees it that way, too.
- That said, the offensive line is fine, in my opinion. But what's not fine is the lack of future leaders in that group. That's the reason I would draft this position among the first three picks this year.
- I like Dan Moore. I like Kevin Dotson. I like Mason Cole. Those are the positions that were either A.) Identified as preseason weaknesses (in the case of Cole), or B.) Identified as in-season weaknesses (in the case of Moore and Dotson) by most fans.
- I didn't want to say most analysts, because I'm not sure close inspection of Moore and/or Dotson would reveal grave weakness. Yes, Moore allowed seven sacks to lead the team, but I feel he was serviceable at left tackle and can grow into something more. I also love Dotson's road-grading skills.
- So why draft an offensive lineman if I'm satisfied with the young guys they've amassed? Well, first of all the unit has a great need for depth. The group of five can't be expected to play every game again this year. Secondarily is the young leader thing. First-round linemen grow up to become captains and leaders in the locker room for a decade. See Cam Heyward.
- So, I'm all for getting an Eagles-type "a**kicker" with a premium pick, no matter what OL position he plays. Depth is needed everywhere there, and so is a young and future captain.
- On defense, the needs are three-fold. By that I mean one at all three levels.
- I don't see this happening, so I want to get it out of the way, but the Illinois safety, Sydney Brown, gives me Troy Polamalu vibes. I read that from draft analyst Roy Countryman and snickered. And then I watched him. Absolutely agree.
- Do you draft safety early with Minkah back there? Probably not. But Brown appears to be the playmaking strong safety for whom the Steelers have searched long and hard since Polamalu (who was the result of a long-and-hard search to replace Carnell Lake, who was the result of a long-and-hard search to replace Donnie Shell).
- Brown could also play slot nickel and/or enjoin the three-safety package Teryl Austin liked so much.
- Otherwise, I presume the secondary draft piece will be cornerback Joey Porter Jr.
- That's not nepotism. That's just good taste and sense.
- The Steelers could also use the same type of "a**kicker" up front on defense to one day replace Cam as that side's locker room policeman.
- The last need is inside linebacker. So many teams have stopped drafting ILBs early, and with good reason. Super Bowl stars Nick Bolton and Willie Gay were late second-round picks. Kyzir White of the Eagles was a fourth-round pick. Teammate T.J. Edwards was undrafted. Surely, the Steelers wouldn't mind following in this new NFL stratagem after they've tried so hard to replace James Farrior and Larry Foote with high picks.
- I could easily be talked into safety, cornerback, OL and DL – in any order – with the first four picks.
- There's also a real need at wide receiver and possibly tight end.
- So, there are plenty of needs. No doubt free agency will fill a few holes. And I have no doubt the Omar and Andy Show knows at least one team from which it can pluck.
- From there, it's on to the draft to fill in the rest. And the assistant to the general manager will be on the clock and under the gun. ✦

(Jim Wexell, the author of "Polamalu: The Inspirational Story of Pittsburgh Steelers Strong Safety Troy Polamalu" has been contributing to Steelers Digest as a reporter and columnist for decades.)



Dan Moore Jr.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

O-line's development is a mix of factors

BY **DALE LOLLEY**
Steelers.com

Like geese migrating south for the winter, so too do offensive linemen need to move in formation.

If one goose gets out of formation, it affects the aerodynamics for the rest. For offensive linemen, if one player misses his assignment, it can often look like the entire group messed up. And when that happens, the offense fails.

As the 2022 season progressed, the Steelers' offensive line performed like a skein, staying perfectly in formation time and again. And they can attribute that ability to stay on the same page to the continuity they had during the 2022 season along with the camaraderie they built from countless hours spent together both on and off the clock.

"It's a lot tighter group, a lot closer," second-year left tackle Dan Moore Jr. said. "It just feels much more organic in our room. We've got a great group of guys. You mix that with us playing well, and it's a great recipe."

The Steelers rebuilt their offensive line over the past two seasons, with the only holdovers being right tackle Chuks Okorafor, left guard Kevin Dotson and reserve interior lineman J.C. Hassenauer.

The 2021 draft brought Moore and reserve interior lineman Kendrick Green. Free agency in the 2022 offseason saw the Steelers add center Mason Cole, right guard James Daniels and backup tackle Trent Scott. Backup tackle Jesse Davis was added at the end of training camp via a trade with the Vikings.

And offensive line coach Pat Meyer was brought in to make it all work.

Meyer had been with the Bears, Bills, Chargers, and Panthers since 2013. But joining the Steelers this season, he was getting an opportunity to help build a line almost from scratch.

The first thing Meyer did was preach to the group about camaraderie. They had to be together and work together a lot to reach their potential.

"When the five are playing together and now the whole group, there's a trust if the sixth comes in. It's good to have that camaraderie. They do something every Thursday together. They'll hang out, go to dinner, do something, just for camaraderie, to get closer, to get to know each other. Every year is a different group and there are young guys. They're all still young."

The five starters on the Steelers' offensive line fall between the ages of 24 and 26. They are young, but they are experienced.

Okorafor, for example, came to the Steelers in the third round of the 2018 NFL Draft at the tender age of 20. By the time he broke into the starting lineup in his third season, he was still just 23 years old.

"Chuks has played a lot of football, but he's still a young kid. He's 25 years old," said Meyer. "He played two years of high school and three years of college football at Western Michigan. He's young. He's still growing and still learning."

But Okorafor and Hassenauer are the bridge between the offensive lines of the past and the current group. They were with the Steelers when the group of Maurkice Pouncey, Ramon Foster, David DeCastro, and Alejandro Villanueva were constants up front. They saw how those guys interacted with each other on a daily basis on and off the field.

Because of that, they've tried to emulate some of the things that group did.

Part of that is having an offensive line get together every Thursday night. They go to dinner. They hang out with each other. They build that trust, just as the Pouncey-Foster-DeCastro-Villanueva line did.

"It was kind of a tradition that was set in place when Pouncey was here," Hassenauer said. "We've kind of continued that the last two years since he's been gone."

But it's really seemed to mesh this season, with COVID-19 restrictions now loosened. Meyer has seen the positive results of those sessions.

"I know they do get together. That's a good thing. That's a big part of it," Meyer said.

It has also helped that they've stayed amazingly healthy – perhaps in part due to their youth.

The Steelers started the same five offensive linemen in every game in 2022. Cole missed a few snaps here and there with an ankle issue and Okorafor missed one snap in the team's first 14 games, but none of the starting five played less than 96 percent of the team's snaps this season.

"Availability is a big component of it, no doubt," said Steelers offensive coordinator Matt Canada. "When those guys have an opportunity to log snaps together, they have shared experiences and benefits from that. When they don't, and then there's moving people around and the inclusion of different people, then obviously it slows down progress."

It obviously has been a work in progress. Building that kind of trust, continuity and camaraderie takes time with so many new faces and a new position coach.

The availability has accelerated the process.

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"That's something Coach Pat emphasized at the beginning of the season, the healthier O-lines are going to get better and play better each week because it's the same guys essentially on the field playing," Moore said. "When you talk about that camaraderie, that's built throughout the season. That's tremendous. That's very rare."

With that part of the equation addressed, the next step was to start having better and more consistent performances.

When the Steelers had their bye in Week 9, Canada went to the line as a group and challenged the unit. The Steelers were going to run the ball more. And they were going to run the ball better than they had in the first half of the season. The line was going to make that possible.

The challenge was accepted, and the line showed it was up to the task. In the eight games prior to the bye week, the Steelers had three 100-yard rushing games, 759 rushing yards overall, and averaged 94.9 yards per game. In their nine games after the bye, they averaged 146 rushing yards per game and had more than 100 rushing yards in all but one game.

What changed?

"Coach Canada made it an emphasis," Moore said. "He said, 'We've got to run the ball better. We've got to run the ball more. And we're going to do that.' He's stuck to his word. We've tried to uphold our end of the bargain, as well."

It was music to the ears of the offensive linemen. There's yet to be an offensive lineman born who doesn't like to run block more than pass block. Instead of allowing defensive linemen to tee off as they do when rushing the passer, when run blocking, the offensive line gets to be the aggressor.

"That's like the best present you could ever want," Moore said of a bigger dedication to the running game. "That's a gift right there."

But saying you're going to run the ball more and doing it effectively can be two different

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things. Yes, the Steelers showed a greater commitment to the running game after their bye, but it was the blocking that played a big role in making it work.

Where has Coach Mike Tomlin seen the improvement?

"Just the nature in which they put four hands on people, the movement we're getting when we choose to double-team and the understanding of the timing of when to come off or when to not come off double teams," Tomlin said. "That's just born out of cooperative work, one man working with another. It's been fun to watch the cohesion come together between JD [James Daniels] and Chuks, for example. But that has to happen for a right guard and right tackle.

"Oftentimes, they're double-teaming B-gap players, and they come together, and then they've got to deal with the linebackers, however the linebackers show themselves. So, I just see collective growth and development in some of the real cooperative work that comes with that position, like a double-team, for instance. The help principle associated with pass protection is another example. It's really all areas, but the significant

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ones are where multiple people are coming together and gaining understanding and timing relative to the game."

Again, that kind of growth is born out of the camaraderie and continuity the offensive line has seen over the course of last season.

They also put in the work. Okorafor, Moore, and the other offensive tackles often spent extra time after practice working on the pass sets they needed for that week's game.

It's thankless work after a two-hour practice.

"It's just something we started last year," Moore said. "The more reps I got, the more exposure I got to reps, Chuks kind of took me under his wing and we started doing reps after practice. I think that trickled down to this year. A few of the other guys then joined us. It intensified a little bit, but that's OK."

It did not go unnoticed by Meyer.

"We practice hard, and we demand a lot of reps from them in a row. That's part of being in condition," Meyer said. "But they stayed after practice every workday we were out there. They work on their craft and working different hand combinations or run-game stuff. They were doing that every day. It's a tribute to them. They're dedicated players. You have to have that to be successful. You can do the minimum, but you have to do the extra for the average to become a good player, the good player to become a great player. That's what they have to do. They've been working at it."

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The results go beyond just the raw numbers. In 2021, the Steelers' offensive line ranked 28th in Football Outsider's overall line play metrics. Despite the slow start to the season, the Steelers finished 2022 ranked 10th in the same metric.

There might not be a perennial Pro Bowl or All-Pro player in the group as there was in the days when Pouncey and DeCastro were earning such honors. But the overall sum of the parts has been good.

Keep doing what they're doing, and perhaps the accolades will come. But more important are wins and general improvement.

"We're just going to keep our head down and keep working," Tomlin said. "They're not a group that looks for acknowledgement. They understood the amount of tension that was going to be on them because so many of them were new and the collective development was going to be a process. In the midst of that, we needed to be productive enough and to show resolve and collective commitment, and they've done that. So, as long as they continue to do that, it's reasonable to expect the growth and development to continue in all areas, not just the run game."

There are certainly hiccups that happen. That's to be expected when the human element is involved. After all, nobody is perfect. But that's why the group spends so much time together, learning to correct things or communicate with just a look or a nod.

"It's things that go unsaid on the field. It's kind of like, 'Hey, (nodding his head),' and

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he knows," Moore said. "We don't really have to talk as much. There's not as much talk in the huddle. It's more pre-snap on plays. It's how we watch film together. It's funny how you kind of evolve, in a sense, communicating."

That's something else born out of those dinners and the many meetings. Sometimes those things take years to develop. But spending that extra time together has accelerated the process.

"I think we're meshing together well," Hassenauer said. "We added a bunch of new faces this past year, but over time, we've come together quite a bit. That takes time. The legendary lines here before, Pouncey, Dave, Al, Ramon, they were playing together for eight, 10 years.

It takes time, but I think that's something we've done pretty quickly here. We've grown together pretty quickly."

And it gives the Steelers plenty of hope for the group for the future.

Of the current starters, only Dotson is not under contract beyond the 2023 season. If the Steelers choose, they can run back the same starting offensive line group again for the 2023 season.

Given the performance and the improvement the group has shown, that is certainly a possibility.

"Continual," Tomlin said of his line's improvement this season. "But not that we're surprised by that. I think that's a reasonable expectation when you're working hard and diligently on a daily basis."

Given the relative youth of the group, that's to be expected. They are all still players with their best days ahead of them, not behind.

The improvement is not lost on the group, either.

"We wanted to finish the season out strong," Moore said. "Everybody is under contract for next year. I hope to get this group back for next year and keep things rolling." ✦

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At the center of it all, Cole leads by example

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

The center position is one where leadership is required, where communication is a key, and where being a solid, steady force is a must in order for the offensive line, and the offensive unit as a whole, to function efficiently.

This past season, the Steelers got those qualities from Mason Cole, the 5-year veteran who signed in the 2022 offseason as an unrestricted free agent and took over at the center spot from day one.

"Man, he's a sharp guy," said Coach Mike Tomlin of Cole during the season. "He brings a can-do attitude. He's a winner in his approach to ball. He's a good communicator. His football intellect is really solid and it's helpful at that position in terms of the identification of protections and picking up the blitz game."

When Cole arrived in Pittsburgh last March, being a leader, a communicator, was something that was important to him. He wanted to be a go-to guy for the offensive line. And he was. But he wants more, which is a sign of the type of leader he is.

"I think there's always room for improvement in every part of the game, whether it be physical, mental, or even the leadership aspect," said Cole, who will be 27 on March 28. "So, I think I can be better in that aspect. It comes with the position. And then when you sign a contract here, it comes with it a little more, too, just being an older guy in the room, even though I don't feel that old. In our offensive line room, I would be one of the more experienced guys, along with Chuks (Okorafor) and James (Daniels). It just came naturally. I think we've got a really good room and guys bought into what we were doing."

Tomlin described Cole as a "hub of communication on the offensive line." That communication is something that came into play even more this year with a young line playing together as one for the first time and working with rookie quarterback Kenny Pickett.

"One of the biggest parts of playing center is making sure everyone's on the same page," said Cole. "So over time, through the year, I got better communicating and just understanding the guys you're playing with, how much needed to be communicated, what needed to be communicated. There are certain guys who know a little more, have a better feel. And there are guys who don't. It's knowing the guys you are playing with, knowing what they need. It's more like a servant to those guys and making sure they know what they're doing and being that guy for them."

Being “that guy” was a necessity, especially when the line was taking criticism from every direction at the start of the season. The media and fans were hard on them as a unit and also as individuals as the work continued to be an effective unit.

“I think there’s always going to be strong criticism for the most part for the offensive line,” said Cole. “But in our room, we just didn’t pay attention to the noise. We just kept our heads down and it kept working. We knew the type of guys we had in the room. We knew the type of players we had in the room. We never lost confidence. There was never a point where you thought about losing confidence. We knew the type of players we were and just kept pushing forward.”

That attitude, that patience, paid off as the season wore on, because with an offensive line time is the key. Getting five players to work as one isn’t going to happen overnight. It takes reps, it takes experience, it takes time.

The time was also aided by something else, something that can’t be measured on a stat sheet. It was good health. The Steelers starting five offensive linemen started every game in 2022. Every. Single. Game.

“We all played together,” said Cole. “The whole season long. All 17 games we started together and that is pretty impressive for a group. It’s huge. I think we’re the only offensive line that played all 17 games together this year, which is pretty impressive. The reps are so valuable, especially those in-game reps. There’s no way to replicate it. As you get more reps you have a better understanding for the guys next to you and what they need, what they need to hear from me at the line and just how we play together and just those reps, they’re just invaluable.

“I think we saw that through the year. I don’t think we played horrible early in the year, but we weren’t playing at a super-efficient level. And just as the offensive line went, it felt like the whole offense went. We started playing a little bit better, the offense got more efficient, scoring more points, and winning more football games, rushing the ball better.

“For the offensive line, there wasn’t a whole bunch of pep talk that got us to that point. We knew if we were good, we were going to help the offense be really good. I think you saw that as we performed better, the offense went with us, which is natural. In football as the offensive line goes, the offense is going to go. We knew what we had to do. We understood the magnitude of our play and how it affected the offense. And we just got better.

“It did take time. Maybe a little more time than all of us wanted it to. But I think we’re going in the right direction for sure.”

Going from 2-6 to start the season to 7-2 in the final nine games is something that Cole takes pride in, not just for himself, but for everyone in the locker room.

“Just super proud of the guys,” said Cole. “The whole team never stopped working. We just put our heads down and worked. We knew how good we could be, and it wasn’t great early in the year, but we just kept pressing forward and we started to see some of the results later in the year.”

Cole is looking forward to returning in 2023 with a group that has experience under their belt, has the reps as a unit, has cohesion and a relationship. He knows it can do nothing but help them.

“I feel good about the offensive line play and how we ended the season,” said Cole. “It felt good to end the season the right way. If we would have lost the last couple of games, it wouldn’t have felt right. Obviously, we wanted to be in the playoffs, but it feels good now to carry that momentum through the offseason and into the next season.” ✦

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Rooney cites improvement for staying the course

Transcript of the media availability with Steelers President Art Rooney II.

Opening Statement:

Let me just start by saying that even though we fell short of making the playoffs this year, I thought the second half of the season was encouraging. Obviously, we still have a lot of areas that we need to improve on, but I liked the way the team kept fighting down the stretch and kept ourselves alive.

Obviously, a key factor in the season was having a rookie starting quarterback who stepped in about a quarter of the way through the season. The progression of Kenny Pickett I think was obvious, and good to see, and hopefully something that we'll continue to build on next year.

Some key statistics that we saw that I think are evidence of the improvement: Time of possession, the second half of the season, we really started to dominate teams. Third-down conversions, obviously, those two go hand in hand. Big improvement there. We were outrushing teams. Obviously, all those things are related, and can be part of a formula for success.

The defense, I think we also got better as the season went on. Getting T.J. (Watt) back helped in that regard, for sure. But all things considered, the fact that we, as a team, got better as the season went on, is something that we're encouraged by and look forward to building upon as we get into this offseason.

Q. When you evaluate the season in its total, is that the way you look at it? You talked about the second half. Do you evaluate the early stages, or what happens in the second half of the season overrides that when you're evaluating the season?

A. I mean, look, you want to see a team improve over the course of the season from start to finish. No matter what your record is, that's what you're shooting for, to get better as the season goes on. I thought we did that. Obviously, you'd rather not dig too deep a hole in the beginning of the season, which unfortunately, we did. But the fact that we were breaking in new quarterbacks – two of them, in fact – was something that I think was a factor in at least some of the difficulties we had in the first half of the season. But we weren't playing that well on the defensive side the first half of the season either. Giving up big plays early in games doesn't help. So, I don't discount completely the first half of the season, you can't ignore it, but the key is to see that improvement over the course of the whole season. It's encouraging, like I said.

Q. Is that improvement on offense specifically the reason that you decided to stick with Matt (Canada) for another year?

A. I think so. We like to see the improvement. With a rookie quarterback, they seem to work well together. They built a good working relationship. To sort of start over again with a new offensive coordinator could wind up back in the same situation, again, where the first half of the season, you're breaking in a new coordinator. So, we just felt like there's enough there to build on that we want to continue to keep that group together.

Q. A lot of teams now open it up, throw the ball and try to score a lot of points, but you say you like the formula of running the ball. What makes you think that can still work in this day and age with how teams go about their offense?

A. Well, don't get me wrong, I'd like to have an effective passing game, too. I mean, the best teams can do both. Being a team that's tough to defend means you can do a lot of things right. What we're looking for is to be balanced. We need to improve on the passing game for sure. We need to see more yards-after-catch from our receivers. Obviously, we need to be better in the red zone. So, there definitely are some places we need to improve on to score more points, which is the bottom line.

Q. You talked in the past about the run game and wanting to see the improvements of that, especially a couple years ago. The way you have the two-headed running back system, did you like the way that kind of evolved, and did you see that as part of that formula?

A. I liked the way that evolved, certainly. Najee (Harris) and Jaylen (Warren) became a pretty good combination out there and something we look forward to really continuing to grow in the next year.

Q. How much of your relative lack of explosion do you attribute to the youth and how many different moving parts you had? Would the first step toward becoming more explosive, more effective, be pushing the envelope a little bit more, being more aggressive and maybe trying to make a play as opposed to just trying not to turn it over?

A. You've got to decide what your formula for success is going to be. We had a lot of young players on offense, and so that factors into what you do and how you do it. One of the things we did over the course of the season, when you look at the first half vs. the second half, is we didn't turn the ball over as much. So, that gives you a chance to win. Opening the thing up, if you have opportunities to do that you do it. You'd like to have a balanced offense where you can be effective either way and become tough to defend as a result. Let's put it this way: I think we have a lot of good young players on offense who hopefully will take another step next year. That's what we'll be looking for.

Q. When you're evaluating the offense, the way that those games at the end of the year ended, when you guys got big drives from that offense led by Kenny Pickett to win games down the stretch, how much do you take that into consideration specifically?

A. I think that means a lot. Being able to function like that in pressure situations, the game's on the line, the season's on the line, really, in those situations for us in those games, that's good to see.

Q. With Brian Flores this year, you created a position, a senior assistant position if you will. Would you like to see something like that on the offensive side? Is it something that might be a yearly thing?

A. I wouldn't take anything off the table ... But I don't really want to speculate on kind of where we might go.

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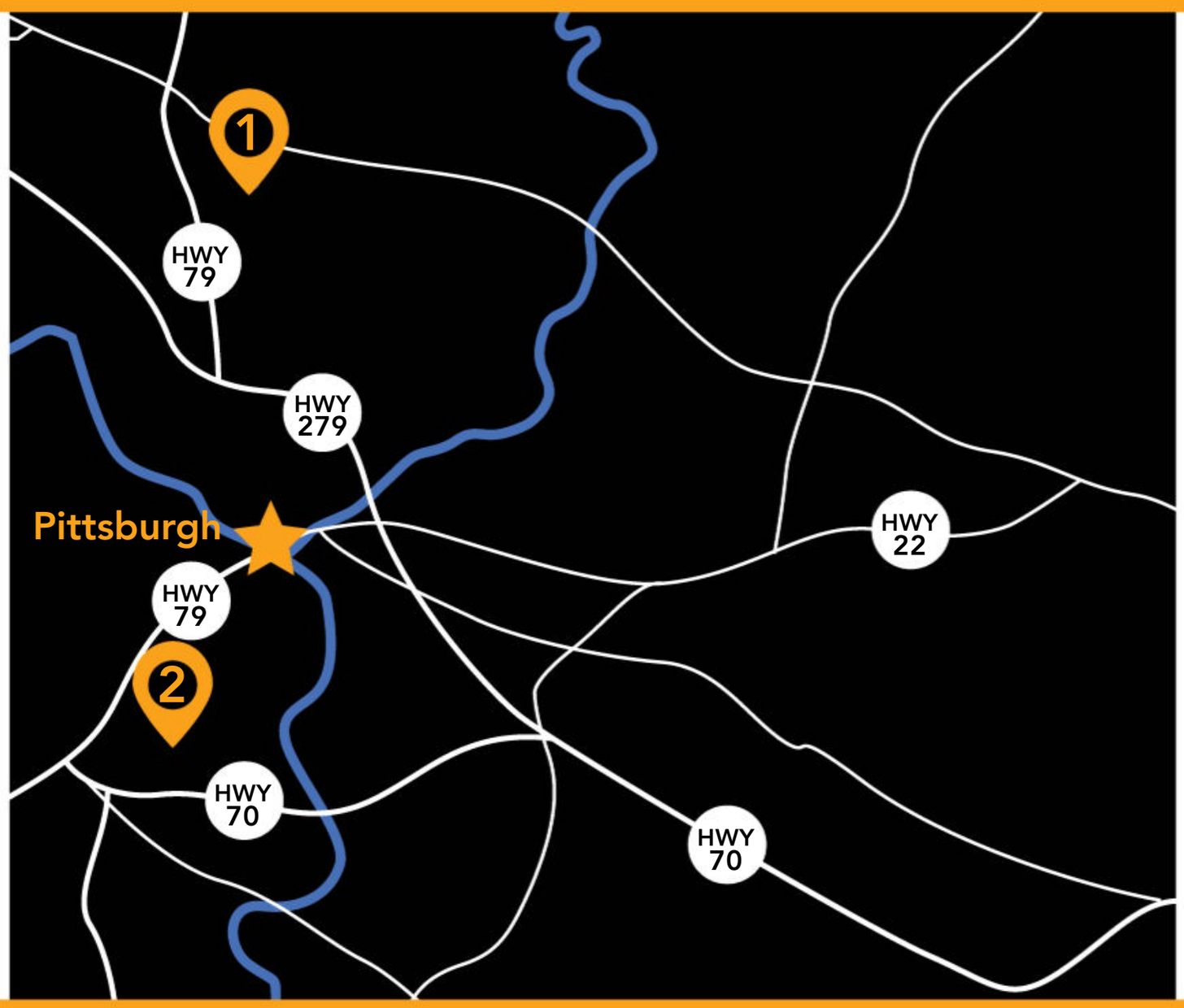

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Q. The decision midseason to trade Chase Claypool, you guys hadn't traditionally traded away players. Was that a tough decision to come to at that time?

A. Yeah, it was a tough decision. It was. We obviously drafted Chase high and had high hopes for him. But we were at a point where, weighing all the positives and negatives of it, it seemed to make sense. So, we pulled the trigger on it.

Q. Because that was such a rare move for you guys in-season to trade a starter, did that signal any kind of change in philosophy or mentality? Was it a one-time circumstance or something you might consider more of going forward?

A. We traded for Minkah (Fitzpatrick) a couple years ago, which we didn't do very often. We traded Chase this year. So, I don't know. Is there a trend here? We just try to do things that improve our roster whenever we can, and I wouldn't want to predict too much that we'll do this, that or the other thing in the future. We're just going to try to do what we can to make the team the best team we can put on the field.

Q. Looking back on it now, if you had to do it again, would you like to see Kenny get more summer and spring first team snaps than he did, or is it trial by fire or however you want to put it of breaking in a rookie quarterback?

A. There's no easy answer in terms of what's the best way to break in a rookie quarterback. Normally you don't go into the season saying, "OK, we're going to start the rookie." I mean, that's kind of not what I had in mind, and I don't think it's what Mike expected. So, the way it turned out turned out pretty good I think, given the fact that we probably didn't expect to have Kenny as our starter Week 1.

Q. Now that you feel like you have your guy in Kenny (Pickett), is building around him a top priority this offseason?

A. Like I said before, I think we have a lot of good young players on offense. We may have a lot of the pieces around him that we need. Now, you can always use another piece, and we'll be looking for the other pieces. But I think we have a pretty good young group there. We'll have an opportunity in this draft that we've got some high draft picks we can utilize. In general, I like what we're bringing back next year on offense.

Q. Are there specific positions that you're looking at to add pieces offensively and defensively that you could discuss?

A. Not yet. I mean, you're always at a point where, look, we can't pass up a good player if he's there at our spot in the draft. You have to be realistic about it. But we're kind of still in that evaluation phase of the offseason, really deciding what we need and what's available. So, more work to be done I'd say on that front.

Q. You were very active last year in free agency. I don't know if it's a little early or not, but do you expect to be less active and focus more on your guys, or just see how it plays out?

A. We've got to look at what opportunities there are for us. We'll do the best we can to try to plug holes where we think we have them.

Q. Three of the four teams in the conference championship games that are playing this weekend had starting quarterbacks on their rookie contracts. Those teams were paying rookie-contract salaries and not exorbitant veteran quarterback salaries. Is this the new model, maybe be aggressive when these guys are young and build the pieces around them, so by the time you have to pay them, you have the complete picture?

A. I would be hesitant to say that just because you have a veteran quarterback you can't compete. You just build the best roster you can with what you

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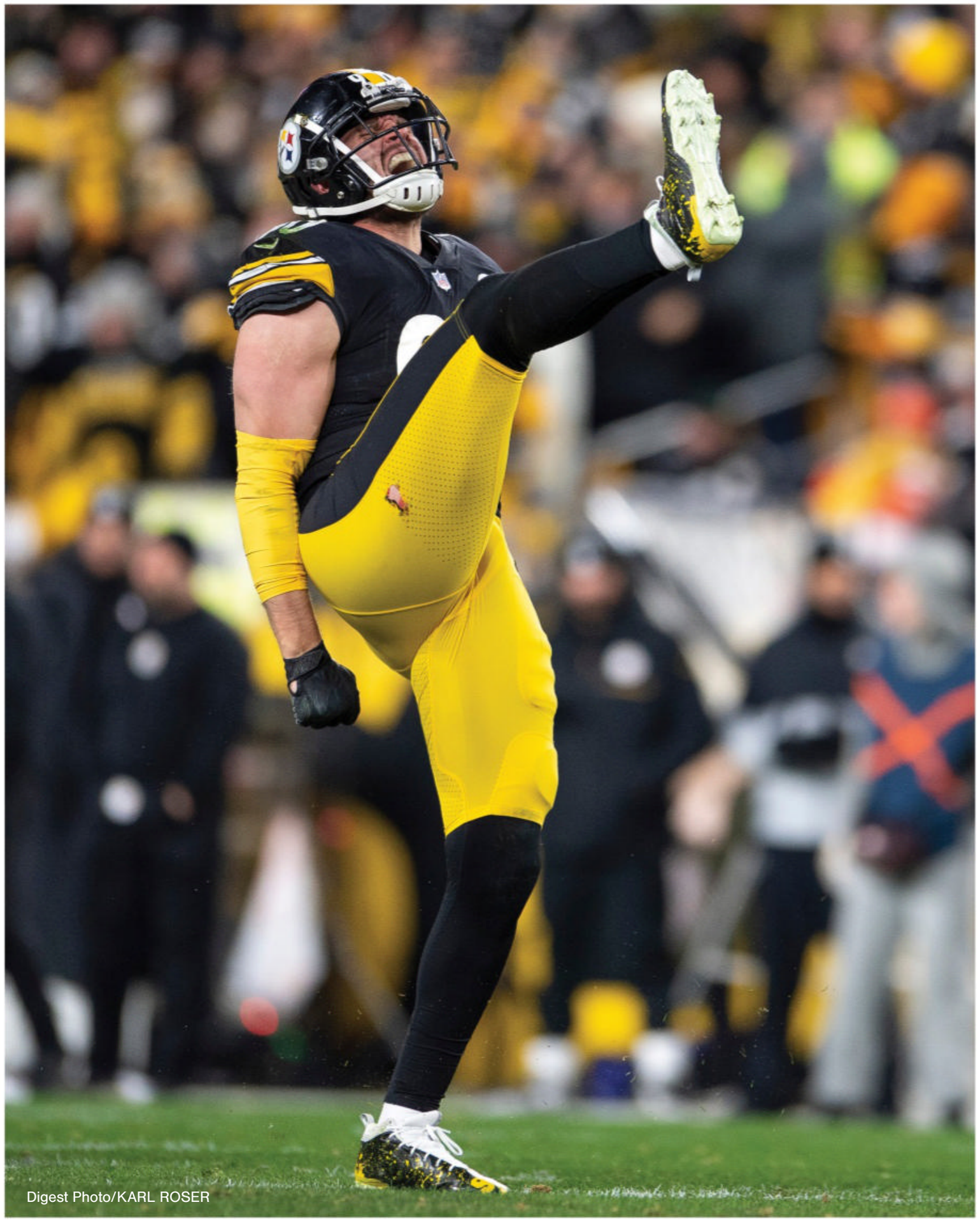

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have. The fact that you have a quarterback on a rookie deal doesn't hurt. But in terms of talking about that as the direction the league's going in, that you need to have a quarterback on a rookie deal, I'm not going to say that's what you need. You need a good quarterback, whether he's a rookie or veteran.

Q. There's a new general manager in place now, and while you've known Omar (Khan) for a long time, are there things that you would like to see changed in how you handle free agency or the draft?

A. I think we're seeing changes already in the way Omar and Andy (Weidl) are preparing for the draft. Those guys have their own ways of doing things that are a little different from Kevin (Colbert). Everybody's a little different. Certainly, we'll see some changes in the approach to the draft. Just some of the things we're doing already this time of year are different. Having said that, Kevin had a pretty successful run. So, there are a lot of different ways to get it done, right? I like the way Omar is going about it so far.

Q. Mike Tomlin said on the first day of training camp that he was excited, even a little nervous, for the first year without Ben (Roethlisberger) in the fold. Did you learn anything about him as a coach this season, and how would you evaluate the job that he did?

A. Well, look, the No. 1 thing I always want to see in a team, and it's up to the coach to make this happen, is to get better as the season goes on. You should be your best team at the end of the season. And so, I thought we did that. Bringing a rookie quarterback along, as I said before, there's no one way to do it right. I think we wound up with a rookie quarterback who got better as the season went on, and we're excited about the future because of that. Those things are encouraging as was the way Mike handled them.

Q. You guys haven't had a lot of playoff success lately, basically since the last Super Bowl appearance. What is your opinion of that, or emotion regarding that?

A. You know, I'm not getting any younger. So, I'll start with that. But in terms of looking backwards, I don't look too far backwards. I've got to look at next year and what we can do to get better next year. That's got to be our focus.

Q. You said you're not getting any younger. Do you have a plan for how much longer you'd like to keep doing this?

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A. I hope a long time. Again, it's a hard thing to speculate on. But I feel good. Hopefully, I've got a few miles left in me. We'll see.

Q. There was some talk about the league potentially looking down the line at hosting championship games outside of the No. 1 seed cities or the top-seeded cities. You guys have obviously hosted quite a few of those. Is that something you would be in favor of, or against?

A. No, I hate the idea. So, I wouldn't like that at all. My sense is that if you put that up for a vote it wouldn't pass today, but who knows?

Q. How do you evaluate the offensive line? I mean, of course, they got better, like you'd like to see, but it looks like there could still be some room for improvement there. Is that a tough thing to do to be able to figure out, in terms of the best way to move forward with that unit?

A. I think that we did get better as the season went on, and that's encouraging. But we're not going to say we can't improve. I mean, we're going to look for ways to improve. I think overall, consistency is something we could do better with. We had some guys that were a little inconsistent, and we've got to do better in that regard.

Q. You've got some players on defense too that are going to be free agents at kind of crucial positions. I know you'd like to keep as many as you can. Is there a concern there that you might have a lot of losses on defense?

A. I mean, there's concern. Yeah, we have some guys we'd like to keep and so we have some work to do on free agency.

Q. You've traditionally mentioned in these settings over the years, "I'd like to see us run the ball better," or "I'd like to see Ben change his style." Do you have something specific to the operation on either side of the ball that has your attention?

A. Score more points. I think that we talked about the areas of improvement, and there are some good ones, but we didn't score enough points is the bottom line. In particular, not great red zone efficiency. So, those are a couple things that I would identify that as an area where we clearly have to get better.

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Q. Have you guys had any discussion about retiring any more jersey numbers? You've got some prominent guys who are possible candidates. Is that something that's come up at all?

A. No. We usually take that slow, and even though we have a lot of great candidates, I think we'll go slow in that department.

Q. Have you gotten a handle on whether you might be involved in any international games this season?

A. I don't expect we're going to be involved in any this season.

Q. Would Mexico be the preferable place for an international game involving the Steelers?

A. As you know, we can't play in Mexico this coming season (because of stadium renovation there). But I definitely would like to play a game in Mexico again sometime soon. We have a great fan base down there. We now have the right under this new international program to have more of a presence in Mexico, and we now have a preseason television agreement down there. Our preseason games are going to be on in Mexico. Our radio broadcasts are on in Mexico. It's a presence that we're going to continue to try to build on.

Q. You have been one the most consistent franchises in terms of being competitive consistently, with 19 years now with non-losing seasons. Mike Tomlin has coached only one game in 16 years where you guys have been eliminated from playoff contention. But when you see what happened with the Rams in 2021, when you see what happened when Tampa Bay went all-in. Are you still pretty confident that the Steelers way, which is sort of based on consistency, is still the model that you guys need to follow to reach that top goal?

A. I think that the way we've done it, we give ourselves a chance to be competitive every year. And that means you have a chance to get into the tournament and have a chance to win it. So, I'm not saying we wouldn't take some chances if we thought we had something that we really could build on, but I don't see anything changing dramatically in that regard.

Q. A lot of the fan base is upset with 9-8 every year. Is there some way that you take that as a good thing, knowing that they want more, knowing how involved the fans are in everything you guys do?

A. I am never going to complain about our fans caring. We're lucky to have the kind of fans we have. They're tremendously enthusiastic. They show up all over the country to support us, which is great. We're happy they care and have strong opinions about what's going on. That's all good as far as I'm concerned. ✦

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T.J.'s 2022 fell short of expectations

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

The 2022 season was a far cry from what linebacker T.J. Watt had hoped for.

Coming off a season where he won the NFL Defensive Player of the Year, he had high hopes for the 2022 campaign. But those hopes were somewhat dashed when he suffered a pectoral injury in the Steelers season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals.

Watt immediately thought he was done for the season, his heart sinking over the thought of the year being finished for him almost before it started.

"It was difficult, especially in the moment," said Watt. "You think you're done for the whole season. It's hard to really compartmentalize what's happening and why it's happening in the moment."

The worst part was 'the moment' seemed to last an eternity for Watt as he waited on the fate of his season. Sure, it was only a day or two until he learned his situation, but it seemed like a lifetime.

While he was waiting, he got some advice from his own family, talking to his brothers, Derek Watt and J.J. Watt, who both went through torn pectoral injuries in their careers.

"It was a lot of calls with Derek," said Watt. "I was talking with him a lot. He's gone through that exact injury before and I was like, what did it feel like? Did it feel like this? Could you do this, could you do that? And same with J.J. because he had the same injury as well.

"From what they were telling me it almost felt like it was the same injury to be honest and I was thinking the worst. It didn't give me any comfort in talking to them and seeing how their injury felt because it felt like I could do the same stuff they could and couldn't do the same stuff when they required surgery. It didn't really provide me any comfort."

Comfort would eventually come when he got the news from Dr. James Bradley, the team's orthopedic surgeon, that he didn't require surgery and could return to the field in 2022.

"There was a time frame I thought it was completely torn and I was going to be out the year and need surgery," said Watt. "And then meeting with Dr. Bradley after seeing the scans, I started to see some positive news, and then another secondary doctor saw the MRIs and he agreed. So, within a day or two I pretty much knew I was able to come back and didn't need surgery.

"It was terrible waiting, even though it wasn't that long. But the news was good. Once I figured out that I was able to have a chance to come back, I was kind of on the road to recovery right away, and asking what can I do to get better?

"My first reaction was, 'Let's go, let's get to work.' How quickly can I come back? When can I start the rehab process? I was just trying to keep my legs active as much as possible, keep the right side of my body going so that when I could start to train my left side and my pec, that there wasn't much lag time.

"It's tough because you want to push and that's always how I am. But in situations like that, you have to listen. There are so many guys in here that have our best interests at heart, and they always tell you, just make sure that you're doing it right. And credit to (head athletic trainer) John Norwig and (senior conditioning coordinator) Garrett Giemont for doing a great job of overseeing all that and making sure that they protect us from ourselves."

While Watt got satisfaction jumping right back into the rehab process, what killed him was being a spectator on game day, especially when the Steelers opened the season 2-6 and his absence was felt.

"It was difficult just watching. Very difficult," said Watt. "I tried to learn as much as I could and see where we needed help and juice and spark and learn how to provide it. To be able to have the headset on for a couple of weeks to kind of get a coach's perspective also helped.

"I wish I didn't have to go through it, but it provided me great perspective. It reminded me of how much I love the game, how much impact you can have when you come in the game, not even as far as playmaking, but just as far as bringing juice and bringing excitement. I've always said it. This is such a rare window. We're living our absolute dreams. You have to play like it. When you play like it, stuff like that is contagious. And it's been like that not only on game days but also on the practice field. I just really cherished that this past season because it was taken away from me early on and I was able to enjoy it when I came back."

That comeback for Watt was special. He missed a total of seven games, returning after the Steelers bye week, a stretch where the Steelers went 7-2.

His first game back was against the New Orleans Saints at Acrisure Stadium and for him, it just hit different.

"It's chilling," said Watt. "It really is because it's like you're back home, especially at Acrisure Stadium. The fans are just so incredible in Pittsburgh, and that made that so special. It was bone chilling. It's hard to describe. When you put so much work into it and you make one play, you kind of black out for a moment and you just get so excited because it's so hard. It's so difficult to be in this game. It's so difficult to stay in this game, let alone to make plays. So much work goes into it that it was overwhelming to be back."

Overwhelming yes, but there was that initial question of how his body would react, how the pectoral muscle would react on that first snap. It was something he had to put out of his mind as much as possible, even though he was wearing a brace that was a constant reminder.

"I think subconsciously there's always hesitation, especially when you're coming back from an injury, and you have a brace on. That kind of lets you know that something is wrong on your body," said Watt. "I don't ever go in thinking about it because you can't play like that. You have to be able to play free. They always say if you're playing to not get hurt, you're going to get hurt or you're going to get someone else hurt. You have to play as fast as you possibly can. At least in my mind I thought I was. But looking back on film in those early weeks, I definitely wasn't myself."

Watt finished the season with 39 tackles, 27 of them solo stops, five and a half sacks, eight tackles for a loss, five passes defensed, two interceptions and a forced fumble. He was voted to the 2022 Pro Bowl Games, although he didn't take part as he is still working his way back to full health.

Watt admitted that he didn't fully feel like himself until the last couple of weeks of the season, something that frustrated him.

"It was probably the last two weeks of the season that I started to really feel like myself," said Watt. "I don't know if I ever fully got back, but I was definitely climbing and starting to feel a lot better and I wasn't coming out of games super sore. I was finally in football shape and getting back to taking chances and playing free and not being so worried about making mistakes. That's the frustrating thing for me. I felt like I was starting to gain my stride and get back to who I am."

Despite the season not ending the way Watt had hoped it would with a postseason run, he does feel the Steelers were on the right path and the way the year ended can serve as a building block for the future.

"This defense played really good football and hopefully we can build on that," said Watt. "And you saw what the offense was doing as well. I feel like we have a lot to build on here as a as an organization." ✦

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Highsmith's jump traced to confidence

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

There is a jump that players are expected to make from their rookie seasons to their second years, but that jump is expected to be even greater when year three rolls around.

And for linebacker Alex Highsmith, year three was a monster jump.

"It was a good year, but I'm far from satisfied," said Highsmith. "I never get complacent or comfortable, but I am grateful for a better year and being injury free for a year. I got hurt before the year in camp but was fortunate that I went through the season without an injury. I got little bumps and bruises, but I'm just blessed to have this platform that God has given me. I always want to be grateful no matter how it's going.

"I never want to get complacent, but I always want to be grateful."

And the Steelers defense was grateful for Highsmith in 2022. He had a breakout year, one which saw him lead the team in sacks with a career-high 14.5, after recording a combined eight his first two seasons.

"It gave me a lot of confidence," said Highsmith. "In 2021, I didn't have a good start to my year dealing with injuries. I ended up finishing the year strong. This past year, I just wanted to start fast and continue it throughout the year. I felt like I was playing with more consistency this year and more confidence because I know the type of player that I can be. I just want to continue to get better every year.

"It was just a whole different confidence level this year. I'm just going to try to do my best every year to have even more production. If it doesn't come, I'm still going to do this. I'll still be the same guy, still doing the same type of preparation that I do. I'm a process driven guy, so I'm not driven by the results or the outcomes. If I knew that I was going to go into a game and not get any sacks, I would still prepare the same exact way. I just want to continue to be process driven through this next year."

Highsmith said he pushed himself in 2022 to be at his best every week due in part to the desire to always be better, but also helping to make up for the loss of fellow outside linebacker T.J. Watt, who missed seven weeks with a pectoral injury that happened in Week 1.

"It stunk losing T.J. who is the best in the world at what he does," said Highsmith. "I just wanted to go out there and be my best self every game. I wanted to continue to do what I was doing after that first game, coming out and having three sacks the opener. I wanted to continue to apply pressure and get to the quarterback. I just wanted to go out there and be my best."

And if there was anyone who thought Highsmith did his best, it was Watt. Watt who was there for Highsmith last season, helping him whenever he

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asked while he was sidelined with his injury. But Watt was quick to admit that Highsmith didn't need a lot of help.

"Alex doesn't need much guidance," said Watt. "He's really gotten into his own routines now. He has a great rush repertoire. If he has any questions, I'm always there to provide answers. But he's a product of himself. He's worked his absolute butt off to get where he is.

"To see the growth. That jump from year one to year two in the league, and then from year two to year three and you just hope to keep climbing. He's been able to do that, and it's been awesome to see your counterpart put in the work and be rewarded and the future's bright for the outside backers of the Steelers."

Highsmith brings an approach that lets you know the future is bright for him. In addition to leading the Steelers in sacks, Highsmith led the NFL with five forced fumbles. He said it's a product of practice and the techniques and approach brought by defensive coordinator Teryl Austin, as well as defensive line coach Karl Dunbar and assistant outside linebackers coach Denzel Martin. It's also a product of Highsmith's dedication and work ethic.

"The culture of this defense is to get the ball out," said Highsmith. "The coaches emphasize it. They do a good job of setting up drills for us to work on finishing at the top of the rush. We do a lot of pass rush drills and at the end there's always a finish and there's always someone standing with the ball. We're working on reaching over, reaching through and getting the ball out. I think it starts with practice and we're working those because it's just muscle memory where you get around the edge, you get around the corner, you always just reach because you've done it so much."

And if you ever watched those drills, you would notice one thing right away. The energy they bring to it. The players support each other, encourage each other, and bring an energy that can be felt.

"It's so important to bring that energy," said Highsmith. "This past camp we had so much energy, especially in the defensive line room and the defensive side of the ball. Bringing that energy out just brings out a lot of competition. And I love competition. I love how Coach (Mike) Tomlin breeds competition, especially at camp with the seven shots and all the competition drills, competing for good food for the night. He does a great job bringing that out and it helps us in the game."

'23 opponents set

While the dates and times won't be announced for a few months, the Steelers know who will be on the 2023 regular season schedule, which includes 6 games vs. AFC North opponents.

This year the AFC North teams will face the AFC South and the NFC West in games at home and on the road. In addition, there will be three games based on finish within divisions, with the AFC North teams facing teams from the AFC East and NFC North at home and the AFC West on the road.

With 17 games on the schedule, the Steelers will have an additional home game in 2023, with the NFL rotating the 17th game on a home/away basis each year.

At home the Steelers will play the Baltimore Ravens, Cincinnati Bengals and Cleveland Browns in the North, in addition to the Arizona Cardinals, Green Bay Packers, Jacksonville Jaguars, New England Patriots, San Francisco 49ers and Tennessee Titans.

On the road the team will face Baltimore, Cincinnati and Cleveland, as well as the Houston Texans, Indianapolis Colts, Las Vegans Raiders, Los Angeles Rams, and Seattle Seahawks. ✦

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